DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 485 FL 014 008

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TITLE The Friday Lunch Program.
INSTITUTION Ashland Coll., Ohio.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Exchange; *English (Second Language); *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Intermediate Grades; *Lunch Programs; Program Descriptions; Second Language Programs
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

An effective, inexpensive means of cross cultural and linguistic enrichment is available through a "Friday Lunch Program" developed by Ashland College, Ohio in October 1980. International students from the college meet in three one-hour lunches, with selected 5th and 6th grade students from local schools. The lunches are intended to increase cultural awareness for the elementary students and facilitate ease in usage of casual conversational English for the international students. Principals, teachers, parents and students have shown acceptance and continued interest in the program, making it a required part of the curriculum for listening/speaking classes in three upper levels of the intensive English program at Ashland College. (JW)

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THE FRIDAY LUNCH PROGRAM

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The Friday Lunch Program

One of the simplest, cheapest and yet most effective of the international programs at Ashland College is the Friday Lunch Program started in October, 1980.

Dedicated to the idea that cross cultural communication seems to work much better over a meal, the program brings together local elementary students with international students on the college campus for a series of lunches and conversation. Since the program has started, 220 international students from more than 25 different countries and 450 elementary pupils have taken part.

The mechanics of the program might seem complicated on the surface, but are really quite simple. Interested American and international students are found, prepped with names and biographies of their partners and possible topics of discussion, brought together in the college cafeteria on a prearranged Friday and paired off for an hour of lunch and talk. The same groups are then brought together at the same time for the next two Fridays so that there is a continuity to the developing relationships.

The elementary pupils are ably organized by David Kowalka, the Coordinator of Gifted Programs with the Ashland City Schools. Dave locates teachers and pupils from grades 5 and 6 in the seven local elementary schools who are interested in the idea. He then secures permission from parents and principals. "The response has been excellent," he says. "Parents have been very cooperative, paying for the breakfasts and taking the time to bring their children to the cafeteria. Some even stay and take pictures." Only one principal balked at the idea the first year, but even he later joined enthusiastically. Dave stresses to teachers the potential educational benefits of the interchange, suggesting topics of conversation and pre- and post-program classroom sharing of the experiences. The pupils are asked to write a brief autobiographical sketch and to do some research on the country of the international

student who will be their partner. The program is organized so that two elementary schools are represented for each series of lunches: one group that has done it before and one new group.

The international students are coordinated through the International Student Services office of Ashland College working in conjunction primarily with the intensive English program on the campus. Recognition of the benefits of the Friday Lunch Program for linguistic and cultural enrichment (discussed below) have led to its being adopted as a required part of the curriculum for listening/speaking classes at the three upper levels of the intensive English program. Thus, in lieu of a Friday class in listening/speaking, students attend the Lunch Program. At the beginning of the 7-week session, students are informed about the program and are also given an assignment to write brief autobiographical sketches. Teachers in the listening/speaking classes are asked to conduct pre- and post-lunch discussions to explore possible topics, questions on vocabulary, and to confront frankly the international students' fears in meeting strangers.

The autobiographical sketches are exchanged at least a few days before the first meeting date. We have found that these sketches help greatly in motivation and in reducing anxiety about the initial meeting.

To ensure a smooth flow of conversation, topics are agreed upon in advance for the two groups, though students are encouraged to depart from them if they want. Topics range from sports to clothes to parenting to homework. As the three part series progresses, both groups of students are encouraged to bring realia: for the international students, this could be money, photos or miscellaneous objects from their countries. The American pupils have brought everything from Rubic's cubes to sports trophies to family photos.

The program has benefitted both international and elementary student programming in a variety of ways. The cultural interchange has been an obvious benefit: The American pupils, some of whom have never traveled outside of Ohio, have learned about foreign countries and customs first hand, and international students have had a chance to learn about the lives of young Americans, a group too often not met or heard from in their stay in America. Students tell of friendships begun, sometimes of Host Family invitations. One Venezuelan student, casually remarking on an upcoming birthday, was surprised by an invitation to the elementary school for a party in his honor. The increased interest in language has been another result: for the international students, learning and practicing casual conversational English; for the elementary pupils, an increased enrollment in foreign language classes. Publicity has also been one result: the local newspaper published prominently a picture of a Kuwaiti student at a breakfast showing his country's money to two American pupils, and a longer story is planned for this year.

The participation of a wide range of people--principals, teachers, parents and students--has ensured a broad interest whose benefits have only begun to be appreciated. In an age of budget reductions, a program of this kind with little expense involved has won quick and solid acceptance. And the fact that the program doubled in size after its first year is a good indication that it is alive and well and of interest to the students involved.

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